

**Traduttore, traditore? Dynamics of Translation and Authority
within the Context of the Global Spread of Chinese Mahayana
Ritual Formats**

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A few years ago, in the spring of 2018, I attended a Bodhi Day celebration (*chengfo ri* 成佛日) at Hsi Lai Temple in Los Angeles County. At the time, I was conducting multi-sited fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation on the globalization of the Taiwanese Buddhist order Fo Guang Shan (佛光山, Eng.: Buddha's Light Mountain). I had already spend many months in Taiwan and South Africa and was about to move on to the next field site, the Fo Guang Shan ancestral temple in Yixing, Mainland China.

Bodhi day is the day Chinese Mahayana Buddhists commemorate the enlightenment of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni. In 2018, the day fell on a Wednesday. In addition to the customary activities on the actual day – an early morning's Dharma assembly (*fahui* 法會) and the free distribution of Eight Treasure Congee (*babao zhou* 八寶粥 – the main festivities are hold on the Sundays immediately before and after. This way the temple ensures people can attend besides their busy work schedules. For people's convenience, festivities are hold in Mandarin as well as English. The English language celebrations followed the format of a variety show. People went on stage to play the piano, recite poems, and to sing and dance. One performance stood out, however. Two Buddhist youth performed an excerpt of a Dharma assembly. They wore the customary ritual gowns of the Chinese Mahayana (*hanchuan fojiao* 漢傳佛教) and played traditional Dharma instruments. The tune and meter too followed standard custom. Yet something was unusual, they chanted the liturgy in English translation.

Chanting and recitation are central Buddhist cultivation practices. Invoking the Buddhist Dharma as a sonic practice plays an important role for Buddhists of most traditions, but especially for those in the Mahayana. Buddhists, for example, deploy chants as an educational tool for transmitting the Dharma. Monastics chant Buddhist scriptures during a Chinese Mahayana Dharma assembly or during morning and evening

services in temples. Chanting and reciting also have a social function in that they link the individual to the group. They are often practiced collectively, within a monastic or temple setting. Furthermore, the place a person occupies within this sonic space expresses their position and status within the group. Monastics customary stand in the front, the first row is reserved for important donors, and women and men stand on different sides of the temple hall.

Chanting, of course, also serves as a cultivation practice in a narrow sense. It produces merit for the practitioner, merit that is directed towards oneself and transferred to others. It may ensure salvation after one's death by providing access to the Western Pure Land. It expresses regret when conducted in the context of repentance rituals, or aspiration and determination while chanting vows. In addition, chanting also has an array of more immediate practical functions, for example, shorter phrases such as mantras and dhāraṇīs are chanted for protection.

Within a global Buddhist setting outside of Asia, however, the situations is different. Despite its fundamental importance, outside of Asia it is meditation that came to signify the most well-known Buddhist cultivation practice. To the extent that some non-Asians even engage in the narrative that meditating is the only way to practice Buddhism. Because of these differing perceptions, most Asian Buddhist groups that operate on a global scale provide meditation classes to attract non-Asians. Some Buddhists in the Chinese Mahayana tradition, however, also began to translate the liturgical chanting of Dharma assemblies into the English language.

This paper provides a case study of an American Buddhist youth, Michael (name changed by the author), and his endeavors to translate Mandarin chanting into English and to facilitate English language Dharma assemblies at a Fo Guang Shan overseas temple. Based on interviews and participant observation, I explore the motives and early beginnings of his engagements, and investigate how English language Dharma assemblies at Hsi Lai Temple in Los Angeles County came into being and finally ceased. I also contrast Michael's efforts with a parallel top-down initiative launched by Fo Guang Shan headquarters. In the conclusion, I will contextualize both attempts, and discuss them relating to issues such as preserving orthodoxy versus adaptation to new cultural

contexts. The aim of this paper is not only to explore the impact of transcultural dynamics on the global spread of the Chinese Mahayana tradition, but also to understand how Asian transnational Buddhist actors negotiate the interplay of orthodoxy and innovation in a Western-centrist world.

1. The Globalization of Fo Guang Shan

Before we turn to Michael and his translation project in detail, let me provide some background on Fo Guang Shan and its global operations. Fo Guang Shan is the leading contemporary representative of a modernist reformation movement in the Chinese Mahayana. The order's socially-engaged approach to the Buddhist tradition is called *renjian* Buddhism (*renjian fojiao* 人間佛教; Eng.: Buddhism of the human realm).¹ Having emerged in response to the process of building China as a modern nation-state, the development of this modern Buddhist religiosity represents a successful attempt to secure a space for the Buddhist tradition within modernizing Chinese societies. According to Buddhist doctrine, our world is subdivided into six realms: the realm of the gods, asuras (or half-gods), humans, animals, hungry ghosts, and the hells. For *renjian* Buddhists such as Fo Guang Shan, the Chinese Mahayana of the past had been overly preoccupied with commercialized services relating to ghosts and death. By shifting the emphasis to the human realm, Fo Guang Shan and other Buddhist modernizers instead stress that it is the world of humans – and thus society – that constitutes the central space for Buddhist practice. Fo Guang Shan, besides its religious undertakings, is known for its countless cultural, educational, and charity engagements in secular society. Together the four fields of engagements form the core of the order's modernist Buddhist religiosity.

¹ *Renjian fojiao* is often translated by its adherents as “Humanistic Buddhism”. However, in English, the term “humanistic” contains strong connotations of Renaissance humanism. In order to clarify the distinction between the two, I have adopted the romanized Chinese term.

Today, the order maintains around 200 temples and practice centers in addition to a range of affiliated facilities worldwide.² The remarkable global development of Fo Guang Shan's temples and practice centres unfolded over just a couple of decades. It was made possible by changes in the global power equilibrium, the economic development in Asia, and post-1965 liberalizations of migration laws of Western states such as the US that facilitated the emergence of a new generation of affluent and highly educated ethnic Chinese migrants. For many of these new migrants, who had moved to overseas to receive higher education or to invest in business, Los Angeles County was the prime destination.

Over the second half of the last century, the composition of the global Chinese diaspora community became increasingly complex and layered. Ethnic Chinese from different origins have emigrated in waves, which is also reflected at the order's overseas temples. Today, ethnic Chinese migrants of different national and regional origins—from Taiwan, Southeast Asia, Hong Kong and increasingly the PRC—visit the temple to pray, to celebrate holidays, and become members of the BLIA (*foguang hui* 佛光會, Eng.: Buddha's Light International Association), the lay Buddhist organization associated with Fo Guang Shan. It is they who, through their donations of money, time, and manpower, sustain the order's overseas temples and many other undertakings.

The first and most important group at the temple continue to be the Taiwanese, since Taiwanese constituted the earliest subgroup amongst post-1965 ethnic Chinese migrants, the order was founded in Taiwan, and most of the order's monastics are Taiwanese. The next layer consists of Hong Kongese and other ethnic Chinese from Southeast Asia, who not only constitute a substantial portion of the laity but also a portion of the monastic sangha. In particular, some of the younger monastics originate from places such as Malaysia and to a lesser degree Hong Kong. Yet the monastics who are born in Malaysia and Hong Kong tend not only to be younger, but also known for their good English skills. The reason for this lies in the more advanced English language education available in their

² For a thorough study of Fo Guang Shan's global spread, see: Jens Reinke *Mapping Modern Mahayana: Chinese Buddhism and Migration in the Age of Global Modernity* (Berlin, De Gruyter 2021).

countries of origin. Many of them are therefore stationed at the order's overseas temples. The final, most recent layer is comprised of the current wave of migrants from the PRC. While many of the Taiwanese migrants have already reached retirement age, this last group is younger. Attracting this group is thus important in ensuring the future development of Fo Guang Shan overseas.

In addition, the temple also aims to reach out to the second and later Generations. However, many who belong to this group prefer to communicate in the language of the country they grew up in. Most overseas temples also maintain local language chapters. The members of these chapters are non-Chinese speakers such as non-Chinese lay Buddhists. Considering the probably worsening of China – US relations and its subsequent impact on Chinese migration, attracting second and later generation youths as well as non-Chinese is crucial to ensure the survival of Fo Guang Shan's US operations.

Hsi Lai Temple is the flagship overseas temple of Fo Guang Shan. The temple is located in Hacienda Heights, an unincorporated suburban community of Los Angeles that is part of the earliest suburban Chinese neighbourhood – or ethnoburb as US geographer Wei Li dubbed the area – in the United States.³ During the early phase of the order's globalization project in the 1970s, Taiwanese migrants attended Fo Guang Shan's first Dharma assemblies in an old church building in the greater Los Angeles area in such great numbers that the order had to purchase another, bigger church building and eventually constructed the Hsi Lai Temple building complex. Although it is not the biggest in size, it has the longest history and is probably the most industrious. Hsi Lai Temple—besides a whole range of temple activities, too many to be listed here—runs a publishing company, a columbarium, and even a liberal arts university. The temple is also where the global main office of the BLIA is located.

Today, the BLIA Los Angeles local chapter (*xiehui* 協會) has 23 subchapters. The Los Angeles local chapter includes LA County, Orange County, and San Bernardino County. Most of the subchapters are formed based on geographic locality, but some are based on special

³ Wei Li, *Ethnoburb: The New Ethnic Community in Urban America* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011).

characteristics such as language. In total, the LA chapter has about 1800 members. In the beginning, most devotees were from Taiwan, but over time more and more ethnic Chinese from Southeast Asia and Hong Kong migrated to LA. These changes, which were caused by the changing US immigration regulations for specific countries, are also reflected in the BLIA membership. The membership of several of the subchapters consists mostly of Southeast Asian ethnic Chinese who speak Cantonese. Many of them are Sino-Vietnamese. There is also a more recent rise in PRC Chinese. Although most of the BLIA's leadership originate from Taiwan or Southeast Asia, some of the presidents and vice-presidents of subchapters from the more affluent South Bay area come from the PRC. The PRC Chinese are even better represented in the youth groups.

The Hsi Lai Temple runs two youth groups or Fo Guang Shan Yang Adult Divisions (YAD). One particularly serves foreign exchange students, the majority of which comes from the People's Republic. The other youth group targets second and later generations of ethnic Chinese migrants. Many of their parents come from Taiwan. Another subchapter is an English language chapter with many non-Chinese members. Some of its members are of European descent and some are Asian Americans. There are also several members with a South- or Central-American background, which reflects the demographics in the neighbourhoods that surround the temple. The backgrounds of the visitors who visit the temple every day are very diverse. The temple provides docents who give temple tours for those visitors who want to learn more about Buddhism. Other visitors come to Hsi Lai Temple to enjoy the traditional Chinese architecture or to have lunch at the dining hall. Some, mostly but not exclusively Asian Americans, come to the temple to pray or to partake in one of the many religious activities. On an average weekend day there are up to 100 volunteers who help.

Despite the order's reformist orientation, in terms of offered cultivation practices, Fo Guang Shan is deeply embedded within the Chinese Mahayana tradition. The daily schedule of any Fo Guang Shan temple is structured around morning and evening services (*zao wan ke* 早晚課), where excerpts of the standard Chinese Mahayana scriptures are chanted. Dharma assemblies, followed by Buddha's name recitation and Chan meditation, are the most popular forms of religious cultivation practiced

by the order's adherents. In the context of meditation language plays of course only a minor role, for chanting, recitations, and especially Dharma assemblies, however, it is crucial.

While Fo Guang Shan's cultural and civic engagements produce cross-cultural linkages — non-Chinese visiting the temple to experience the Lunar New Year festivities, eat Buddhist vegetarian food at the Water Drop Tea House, or receive an education by going to one of the order's educational institutions — religious activities often remain separated along lines of language and ethnicity. Dharma assemblies primarily take place in Mandarin and participants overwhelmingly are Mandarin speakers. While this remains true at large, in recent years there have also been several developments to complicate the picture. Different groups of actors, at different temples worldwide, lay and monastic, started initiatives to establish local language Dharma assembly chanting services. These actors include monastics with leadership roles at the main temple in Taiwan, as well as second generation Chinese devotees at temples in North and South America. They have translated liturgical texts and experimented with new localized liturgy formats. This paper considers the case of a Buddhist youth at Hsi Lai temple in Los Angeles County.

2. Michael

I reconnected with Michael long after I finished my dissertation-turned-book on Fo Guang Shan's globalization. My goal was to learn more about Chinese Buddhism in the US beyond the limitations of my book, which focusses mainly on first generation migrants. When I began my interview, one of the first things he emphasized, was that he was not a youth group member. There is a general assumption, he said, that the youth group is not interested in chanting. While he somewhat agrees with that assessment, he also voiced some doubts. Some of the ranks a youth can acquire in the YAD, require them to be able to chant certain texts in Mandarin. However, he quickly added that this rule is not enforced outside of Asia.

Language may be a barrier, but there is also a difference in how the youth group sees Buddhism. For most of them, the temple represents a social space, where they can meet other children of Buddhist parents.

They are not necessarily Buddhist themselves; it is more a community service or summer camp kind of thing. Michael thinks YAD members are just as likely to go to the Chinese chanting as to the English chanting service, because they are not interested in chanting to begin with. Yet he points out that youth groups are not representative of young people at temples. He and his friends, for example, were never youth group members. They were not interested in learning how to dance or sing a song. What they wanted to learn was how to practice Buddhism; to learn how to chant, for example. Therefore, they did not really associate with the youth groups.

Michael told me that he was interested in chanting since he was about ten years old. Although growing up as a child of first generation ethnic Chinese parents, he himself did not speak Mandarin. Yet his parents would take him to the temple regularly. Spending his childhood in a big city in the Pacific Northwest of the United States, he and his family went to a small Chinese temple with only few resources. Mandarin language chanting and Dharma assemblies constituted an important cultivation practice at the temple. Despite not being able to understand the words, Michael says that he was drawn to the sounds, structure, and liturgy of the Dharma assembly. He remembers that at the time, he started to think how not understanding the language of the chanting must be very frustrating for people who are interested in Chinese Buddhism, but do not possess any cultural or linguistic background knowledge.

Years went on and during his time in high school, he made his first attempts in translating Buddhist liturgy. Looking at Mandarin chanting manuals, he noticed that one verse normally consists of seven characters. This made it possible to chant them in many different tunes. For example, Michael found that there are at least five to seven tunes for singing the dedication of merit (*gongde huixiang* 功德回向) phrase in Mandarin. The dedication of merit phrase concludes most Chinese Mahayana ritual chanting. If one includes formal and informal ways of chanting it or different speeds, there even are dozens of possible variations.

Michael thought there has to be something similar for the English language. A standard format that allows one to sing any text in any tune one wishes. After a little search, he quickly found an equivalent, the common meter. The common meter is a poetic meter consisting of four

lines that alternate between iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. It is used for English songs such as Yankee Doodle or Amazing Grace. Being really excited about his newly found prospects, he immediately started to try it out. He used the Buddha's Light International Association Four-Line Verse (*Fo Guang siju ji* 佛光四句偈), the credo for members of the BLIA, the lay organization associated with Fo Guang Shan. Thinking he was onto something, he sent his piece to a Fo Guang Shan monastic who is a native English speaker and who at the time was invested in globalizing the Chinese Mahayana tradition. The response was disheartening, however. All he got back was a little smiley face emoji. Apparently, the monk was not impressed.

Shortly after, Michael moved to Los Angeles to attend college. During a school break, he participated in one of the college student retreats at Hsi Lai Temple. As it happened, chanting was a part of the retreat. Retreatants were expected to take part in a simple chanting every morning and evening. This experience changed his perspective. He began to develop a strong appreciation for the unique style of chanting that characterizes the Chinese Mahayana tradition. The musical tradition of the Chinese Mahayana tradition should be preserved, he thought. It is part of a very important and valuable intangible heritage. It is ok to change the words to English, but the tunes and instruments should be retained.

During this time, Michael was also progressing with his private translation projects. He worked on translating elements that constitute the beginning and closing segments within the Chinese Buddhist tradition. The praise to the incense (*luxiang zan* 爐香讚), and the refuge in the Buddha, dharma, and sangha (*san bao gui yi* 三寶皈依). He developed a mode that uses the English meter, but is based on traditional Chinese melody. In my conversation with him, Michael emphasizes that he gave himself some flexibility in terms of translation. He did not attempt to do a scholarly translation. In fact, he said it would be impossible to transfer every single word when the lyrics have to conform to a certain meter. Worrying about issues of orthodoxy, he argues there is a difference in translating liturgy compared to a sutra. When working on a sutra, he tries to be more conservative in his translation style. Because according to tradition sutras are the words of the Buddha after all. Chinese Buddhist

liturgy on the other hand was originally composed much later, many texts origin in the 16th hundreds; some even go back to the early Song or Tang. His was more of an interpretative translation and it was this translation, he performed when I met him first. The excerpts he and his friend presented at the English language Bodhi day were just experiments, Michael quickly added. They wanted to get them out to get peoples' feedback. However, not long after their initial performance, the temple would begin implementing weekly English language Dharma assemblies.

3. English language Dharma assemblies

The English language Dharma assembly was in its form essentially a combination of elements that constitute its Mandarin counterpart, plus a short meditation. The assembly would begin with a quick briefing for the audience explaining all basic elements of the Chinese Buddhist ritual format that were included; prostrations, invocations, a recitation of the heart sutra, a recitation of the Buddha's name while circumambulating through the rows of the Buddha hall, etc. It would end with a short period of meditation, followed by the taking of refuge and dedication of one's acquired merit. At the end, a monastic from the temple would give as a short Dharma talk.

Beginning in the spring of 2018, the temple would hold weekly English language Dharma assemblies every Sunday. They would go on to do so until the beginning of the pandemic in 2020. Michael helped leading the assemblies until the summer of 2019, when he graduated from college and left Los Angeles. Besides being conducted in English, something else differentiated the English language Dharma assembly from its Chinese counterpart. It was led by Michael and his friends, who are lay Buddhists. In the Chinese Buddhist tradition in general, but even more so at Fo Guang Shan, it is customary that monastics play the liturgical instruments and lead the chanting. However, while Hsi Lai Temple is a big temple that hosts quite a number of monastics, many of them are extremely busy and, especially in the beginning, most were hesitant to lead an English language ritual format. Almost all Fo Guang Shan monastics are of an ethnic Chinese background and are non-native English speakers.

When I voiced my surprise about their role during the interview, Michael told me that there is an exception to the rule excluding lay Buddhists from leading the chanting. Whenever there are not enough monastics present or available, lay people may jump in. This rule applies mainly to small overseas branch temples, such as in Vancouver, Oakland, or Berlin, that do not have the resources to host a big monastic community. In places like Taiwan or at big temples such as Hsi Lai, one normally does not see lay people in this role. In the beginning, Michael, his friend, and some longtime lay temple residents lead the assembly. From the second year on, after some monastics learned how to chant in English, they slowly began to takeover. However, they did not do so every week.

While most Mandarin language Dharma assemblies take place on weekend mornings, the English language counterparts were held on Sunday afternoons. They took place right after lunch. Before the pandemic forced Hsi Lai Temple to close most of its facilities to the public, the dining hall attracted many visitors who would come to the temple to enjoy a vegetarian lunch. A poster in the dining hall promoted the activity. The chanting was open for anyone who was interested. The participants consisted of tourists and casual temple visitors who noticed the poster during their lunch and attended afterwards. Another group of participants was people who went to the English language classes on late Sunday afternoons. The first group was extremely diverse, including people of all backgrounds, including many Indian and European Americans and Hispanics. Many were middle aged and came with younger children. The second group consisted of people who have a closer relationship with the temple, but who not necessarily feel comfortable speaking Mandarin. This group included Southeast Asian ethnic Chinese who do not speak Mandarin well. While the total number of people fluctuated, normally there were about 35 to 50 participants.

Despite this success, Michael saw his translation efforts only as an intermediate measure. They are meant for people who are interested in Chinese Buddhism, but for whom language is a barrier. Ultimately, he says, Fo Guang Shan is a school of Chinese Buddhism. If people continue to be engaged in Fo Guang Shan or the greater realm of Chinese Buddhism, they need to know how to chant in Mandarin. Accordingly,

Michael and his friend were very concerned with issues of orthodoxy and lineage. They even feared that many years in the future their efforts could cause to a spit in Fo Guang Shan. It was important to them to stress that Mandarin chanting is the “default” of the tradition. From their perspective, translating ritual texts is a form of localization. It allows people who are interested in the Chinese Mahayana tradition who are not Mandarin speakers to get used to the melodies and learn the structure of the Dharma assembly. He hopes that one day non-Chinese will choose to become monastics and go to Taiwan to study at a Buddhist seminary. Having learned the basics of Chinese chanting in the West, they would already be used to the Chinese Buddhist liturgy and would experience one less layer of culture shock.

Roughly around the time the English language Dharma assemblies at Hsi Lai Temple started, Michael and his friends heard about a similar initiative. The Fo Guang Shan headquarters in Kaohsiung too was working on translating Dharma services into English. In fact, this initiative had its roots at Hsi Lai Temple too. Already back in the 1980s, shortly after Hsi Lai Temple opened, English language speaking visitors expressed interest in chanting.

In the beginning, they just tried replacing Mandarin with Pali. However, because Pali and Chinese are so different in character, it would not work. Pali words are too long; they just would not fit the Chinese tune and meter.

Their goal was to translate the words, while retaining meter and rhyme of Chinese chanting, which according to the monastic representative I spoke to is easy to remember and pleasant to ear and tongue. They tried using English instead of Pali. However, they not just translated the words but also combined Chinese chanting with Anglo-American protestant hymns. The whole Dharma assembly is in English, its beginning and end, the incense praise and the refuge follow the style of a protestant hymn, while the heart sutra in the middle was chanted following Chinese tune and meter. The goal was to retain the value of tradition while at the same time accommodating the needs of a new global audience.

Conclusion

As we can see from both examples, considerations on how to preserve orthodoxy, while also adapting the practice for culturally and linguistically non-Chinese contexts played an important role for both actor groups. Concerned with adapting the Chinese Mahayana tradition for a global audience, both initiatives – top down as well as bottom up – perceived language as the main obstacle to make Chinese Mahayana Dharma assemblies more accessible. English as the local language in the US, the primary space within Fo Guang Shan's globalization project outside of Asia, was found to be the appropriate choice to replace Mandarin. Counterintuitively, the bottom-up initiative by Asian American Buddhist youth was the most concerned about orthodoxy. Michael and his friend were seriously concerned that their engagements could cause a schism in the future. Michael made clear that they perceived their efforts just as tool to make the Chinese Mahayana tradition more accessible. For them chanting in English was an intermediate step that would eventually lead to Chinese language chanting. In comparison, the top-down initiative from headquarters was more experimental. They experimented not just with English but also with Pali. In the end, they choose to fuse Chinese style chanting with Anglo-Saxon protestant hymns. Singing Chinese Buddhist texts in the format of English language protestant hymns is not an invention by Fo Guang Shan. In fact, it goes back to the Republican Era in China. At the time, hymn inspired Buddhist songs were seen as a tool to modernize Chinese Buddhist culture. Now, over one hundred years later, it may be questionable if protestant hymns still carry the flavor of modernity or even meet the taste of the targeted global audience. But the top-down initiative did not just experiment with translating the language of Chinese liturgy, they expanded the meaning of a Dharma assembly. In fact, English language chanting represents thus only a minor engagement at headquarters today. Fo Guang Shan's English language Dharma assembly YouTube channel does contains only one English language chanting video, the other videos of "Dharma assemblies" are Dharma talks. Here, English Language Dharma assemblies have lost their musical quality and are an educational tool to present Buddhism in English.

What happened to Michael and his bottom-up initiative? Not long after Michael left LA and moved on to continue his studies at university elsewhere in the country; the world was hit by Covid. As a result, the Hsi Lai Temple stopped all its activities open to the public, including English language Dharma assemblies. Today the temple has reopened and Dharma assemblies again take place almost every weekend. However, all are in Mandarin. In the meantime, Michael became engaged in a Buddhist youth group at his new university. One of the activities he organizes for the group is communal Chinese language chanting. Although his group consists of members of all ethnic backgrounds, people are enjoy chanting in Mandarin. In fact, the one time when he tried to conduct it English, members of his youth group found it strange and said they preferred Chinese. Asking, what made him changed his mind; he referred to the Japanese Buddhist traditions at the American west coast. Although Japanese Buddhism is in the US for many generations and the tradition has adapted to its new socio-religious contexts in many ways, they have preserved their Japanese language chanting traditions. If we are trying to teach a tradition, Michael says, it is not just about conveying the texts but also to teach people how to operate within the Chinese Mahayana more generally. If they learn chanting in Mandarin, people can go to any temple and just take part and know what they are doing.

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